

FRUITS AND NUTS

Tropical fruits are becoming constantly more familiar to Americans, partly from travel, partly because new varieties are being grown in the semi-tropical parts of the United States, and partly because improved methods of transportation are increasing the effective range of shipping them; but even after many years residence in the tropics one may hardly claim to know them all. There is an interesting succession of seasons for them, and one learns to watch eagerly for the appearance of this or that fruit on the market.

Mangoes are feminine in Portuguese, hence are called mangas. Northerners who try them the first time often dislike them, complaining that they taste like turpentine; and as they are full of fibers, someone described a mango as most nearly resembling a paint brush soaked in turpentine. However, it is rare to see a person who has been in the tropics any length of time and has not learned to like mangoes. The beautiful manga rosa so abundant in the neighborhood of Recife is said to be the finest in the world, and I can readily believe it. As large as a large grape fruit, (though not the same shape) and with a coloring as fine as that of the choicest peach, it is seldom equaled for beauty or flavor. There are many varieties of manga, differing in size, appearance and flavor. One of the commonest is the manga espada (sword mango), which remains dark green in color even when fully ripe, and is very sweet and good. Near our house was a tree of small mangoes called manguitas, whose piquant flavor used to appeal to me. Around Recife, mangoes are usually ripening before Christmas, and remain in season through March, but on the plateau of the interior they are later, coming on in February or March, and lasting sometimes well on into June. Some people are allergic to mangoes, and break out in a violent rash if they eat them in any quantity. I knew one woman who said if she so much as walked under a mango tree she would break out; but fortunately most of us are free from that affliction.

The fruit known in Spanish America as papaya, and generally called by that name in English, is called mamão in Brazil. It is an easy fruit to grow, and of great practical utility, as it stays in season throughout the year. The tree has no branches,

only a crown of broad leaves, and the fruit grows right on the trunk beneath these. There may be twenty-five or thirty at one time, ranging from blossoms and tiny fruit right at the crown to ripe fruit two or three feet below. As the ripe fruit are removed at the bottom, others are being formed at the top. A mamão is ordinarily about the size of a canteloupe, but with favorable soil and climatic conditions may grow as large as a medium sized watermelon. When cut they closely resemble canteloupes, except that the seed are round, and a little larger than BB shot. They are usually served with the seed still in them, as many people like to eat the seed, which are easily chewed, have a sort of peppery flavor, and are said to be very good for the stomach. Newcomers to the tropics generally do not like mamão at first, perhaps because they expect it to taste like canteloupe. At first I tried it with salt and pepper, and was able to eat it, without enthusiasm. The Brazilians put sugar; but I came to like it best without any addition, as it is quite sweet. The green fruit is used for making pickle, and the leaves are often added to tough meat in the cooking, to tenderize it, which they do very effeciently.

The jaca, or jack, was introduced into Brazil by the Portuguese settlers from the East Indies. The tree grows to be large, and makes an excellent shade tree. The fruit is borne on the trunk, but not at all in the manner of the mamão. Here and there, as if at random, on the trunk and larger branches appear buds, which sprout out, and after an inconspicuous flowering put on the fruit, which grows to be quite large, attaining a weight of forty pounds or more at times. The outside of the fruit is covered with coarse spines. I never learned to tell when a jaca was ripe without cutting it, but most Brazilians seem to have no difficulty. Inside, there is a mass of pulp, which divides easily into sections, each containing a seed about the size of a man's thumb. There are two varieties of jaca, called respectively "hard" and "soft", the pulp of the former being firm and crisp, that of the latter soft and slimy. In Brazil the seeds are often thrown away, and only the pulp eaten, but the seeds may be roasted or boiled, and are not bad eating. Most foreigners never learn to like jaca, which has a very strongly marked flavor and odor. I came to like it mildly, but my children were

extremely fond of it. In the Brazilian vernacular, cortar (cut) jaca means to curry favor with anyone, and a corta jaca is a person who helps to bring lovers together.

Still another fruit that grows on the trunk of the tree instead of on the branches is the jaboticaba, a small black fruit about half an inch in diameter, closely resembling in size, appearance and taste the wild "muscadine" grape of the southern United States. The trees are not large, but when the fruit is ripe the whole trunk, the large branches, and the upper roots are black with the fruit. Jaboticabas are good eaten raw, and also make a delicious jelly.

Citrus fruits abound. An American is likely to be disappointed in the grapefruit, and lemons are almost unknown, but there are plenty of limes. The navel oranges, native to Bahia, whence they were introduced into California, are planted extensively in Pernambuco, and are very fine. There are other good oranges, too, and they may be had almost the entire year. There is a fruit called a lima, resembling a lemon in appearance, but with no acid, the juice being sweet and insipid. The rind has an odor reminiscent of cockroaches. Doctors often recommend the juice of limas for sick people.

The pinha (sweetsop) was probably so named from a certain resemblance in form (though not in color, for it is light green) to a pine cone. Everybody likes pinhas; most newcomers like them even at the first trial. They are easily broken open, and the white pulp filled with ^{black} seeds the size of orange seeds may be eaten with a spoon, or directly from the broken rind. One spits out the seeds.

Pineapples need no description. Those of Pernambuco are exceptionally fine and large, and ripened in that hot sun are unbelievably sweet and delicious. They are in season from October to March. Juicing a thoroughly ripe pineapple is a very simple operation. It is first peeled with a sharp knife, cutting lengthwise, then, grasping the tassel, or top tuft of leaves with one hand, one squeezes with the other, allowing the juice to fall into a vessel below. In a moment the whole fruit is transformed into juice, an insignificant quantity of pulp being left clinging to the core.

Surely no boy ever grew up in Georgia without eating maypops, which are the fruit of the passion flower. The maracujá is a sort of glorified maypop, but a great

improvement on the Georgia kind. Of the many varieties known in Brazil, the favorite is the maracujá de sangue (blood), so called because its pulp is red. It is impossible to separate the gelatinous pulp from the seeds, but it may be dissolved away with sugar. The pulp with the seeds being placed in a bowl, sugar in proper quantity is added, and the mixture stirred vigorously, after which water is poured in, and strained off through a sieve or colander, carrying with it the sugar and juice. This makes a delicious fruit drink, or may be frozen into sherbet.

A fruit common in Pernambuco, but unknown, I am told, in the south of Brazil, is the imbu. It is a wild fruit, though occasionally planted, and is especially abundant in the sertão. While of an entirely different plant family, it resembles a large green plum in appearance, and to a certain extent in taste. It is good eaten raw, and also makes a nice jelly; but the most popular method of using it is to cook the fruit and remove the seeds and skins by passing through a sieve, then mixing the pulp with milk and sugar to form what is called imbuzada, which is similar to applesauce in texture and appearance, and makes a pretty good substitute for it. We tried freezing imbuzada into sherbet, and found it delicious.

Goiabas (guavas) are plentiful and good. They are like apples in that children cannot be kept from eating them green, and often get the stomach ache as a result. Brazilians are very fond of guava paste, which is called goiabada, a slice of which makes the commonest dessert to be met with in hotels and boarding houses. Almost equally common is a similar paste made from bananas, called bananada.

Bananas like plenty of moisture, and are planted along stream beds, and in low places, but even on high land they bear pretty well if well fertilized. There are a number of varieties, some only fit for cooking, others good raw. A firm-fleshed variety called banana maçã (apple banana) is quite nice, but the very abundant banana anã (dwarf banana -- it is the plant that is a dwarf, the bananas are large) seemed to me to have the richest flavor. Banana plants grow in clumps, containing generally one or two plants with fruit on them, and others approaching the bearing stage, besides a number of small shoots called filhos (children). A plant bears fruit only once.

Therefore when the fruit is ripe the plant is cut down. One does not wait for the bananas to turn yellow. A person of experience can tell by a change in the color and aspect of the fruit, but a beginner first notices that the top bananas of the bunch are getting a little yellowish, and that the birds have already begun pecking them. The stem of the plant is about eight inches through, but is pithy, and may be cut easily with a large knife. One cuts nearly through, then stands aside to let the plant fall; and as it comes down he is supposed deftly to grasp the tail of the bunch and elevate it, so that the bananas do not strike the ground. Bananas, like everything else, have increased greatly in price, but are still relatively cheap. Back in the thirties we used to get them for about one cent a dozen.

Nothing could be more characteristic of the interior of Pernambuco than the pitombas -- those ridiculous caricatures of fruits so dear to every Brazilian child. The tree resembles an ash tree, and the fruit is borne in large clusters, resembling huge clusters of grapes of a golden brown color, each being about three quarters of an inch in diameter. But there the resemblance ceases. Break open a pitomba and you find that the hull resembles pasteboard, and that inside is a layer of sour pulp perhaps a sixteenth of an inch in thickness surrounding a large, hard seed. That bit of pulp is all there is to it; and a great pile of hulls and seeds remains after one has eaten an insignificant quantity of very indifferent fruit. But children love them, and boys risk their necks climbing for them. They bring them to school, litter up the place with the hulls, and throw the seeds at one another. Pitombas are not popular with schoolmasters.

The caju grows wild, but is often planted, or at least allowed to grow when a tree springs up near a dwelling. It makes a nice shade tree, as the leaves are broad. The fruit is pear shaped, two or three inches in length, and may be red or yellow in color. The seed, which forms the cashew nut of commerce, grows outside the fruit, attached to the lower end, and has been described as similar to a parrot's beak in size and shape. It is easily broken off the fruit, and dealt with separately. The fruit is very juicy, the juice being mildly acid, and rather pleasant. It needs to be eaten, (or rather sucked, as one does not ordinarily swallow the pulp) with great

care, as the juice will make an indelible brown stain on the clothes. Children are constantly staining their clothes with it, to the distress of the mothers. Brazilian mothers say that the stain will not come out until cajú time the next year; but the clothes are generally worn out by that time. Cajús make delightful preserves, with a piquant flavor like nothing else on earth; but cooks dislike to make them, as their hands get terribly stained in preparing the fruit.

The nuts, which the Brazilians call castanhas (chestnuts), are more important commercially than the fruit; although I believe that there could be a profitable industry built up in the preparation of cajú preserves. The nut is substantially larger than the roasted cashew nut with which we are familiar, because the shell is thick, and must be removed. Not only is it thick, but it contains an acrid and volatile oil, which may some day be of great value, but so far is not exploited, I think. Small children often get painfully burned about the mouth by putting the raw nuts in their mouths and chewing on them. The simplest way to get rid of the oil and the shell at the same time is to burn them, and use the heat thus produced for roasting the nut. In Pernambuco I believe there are no factories for processing these nuts, but they are prepared at home in the following manner. Get an old bucket, or gasoline can, worthless for any other purpose, and make some holes in the bottom. Fill it half full of nuts, and put it over a fire outdoors. Stir the nuts constantly with a stick. As they begin to get hot, a white smoke will issue from them, becoming thicker as they grow hotter, and giving off a strong odor, at first unpleasant, but as one grows accustomed to it, rather agreeable. Finally the fire will flash in the bucket, and blaze up strongly. You continue to stir until the right point is reached, which is learned by experience and observation, although it looks like they will be completely burned up. Then, when the time has come, you overturn the bucket, spilling the nuts on the ground. Most of them will go out, but if any continue to burn, throw a little sand on them, and they will go out too. The charred shells may now be broken off by striking them lightly with a stick; within a membrane surrounds the kernel. They are good to eat at this stage, but better if they are roasted still further in the oven, salted and buttered.

Araticum is a fruit that belongs to the same family as the pinha, but what a difference! There are several varieties of araticum, the best being known as coração de boi (ox-heart) or coração da Índia (Indian girl's heart). It is about the size and shape of a human heart, and inside a firm rind has a mass of sickly sweet pulp with a perfume so strong as to be almost overpowering. One variety of araticum is called araticum cagão, because its odor is thought to resemble that of human excrement.

The avocado, called in Brazil abacate, is coming to be more and more appreciated in the United States. In Brazil it is highly esteemed, and commands a relatively high ^{one} price, often selling for as much as a dozen bananas, or even more. They are in season sometimes as early as January, and continue into June. One beauty about them is that when you have a tree at home you can leave them hanging in the tree until ready to take them off, as they never ripen on the tree, and will not rot while hanging there. When fully mature, (inchado, swelled up, the Brazilians say) they may be taken from the tree and put away, and in a few days will be mellow and ready for use. Of course all things have limits, and in the course of time they will fall off; but they will hang there for many weeks after being fully mature. They are very nourishing, and are eaten eagerly by all classes of people, but are especially favored by old men, as they have the reputation of being good to rejuvenate elderly people. They are eaten in various ways; I came to think they were best with salt and black pepper, but my wife preferred salt and lime juice, while some people use sugar and lime juice. The Brazilians, however, uniformly mash them up with plenty of sugar. Sometimes they make them into sherbet. There are a good many Portuguese immigrants who come to Brazil, and the Brazilians tell all the jokes about dumb people on the Portuguese. One of their favorites is the story of the Portuguese who was asked what was the sweetest fruit that he had found in Brazil, and replied that it was the abacate. They remonstrated with him that an abacate is not sweet; but he replied, "Oh, yes! You mash it up and put a lot of sugar on it, and it is just as sweet as can be!"

The better class Brazilian is a very discriminating person, and in nothing is ^{is bananas} this discrimination better exhibited than in his manner of eating fruit. If the dessert

is bananas, which it often is, you will see your Brazilian gentleman slice off the two ends, and then neatly split the skin and peel it back with the knife. I noticed one who sat opposite me in a club car on the train. He had bought some limas at a station we passed, and asked the waiter to bring him a knife, fork and plate. He tested the edge of the knife with the attitude of an expert, whetted it a few strokes on the edge of the fork, then, thrusting the fork into a lima, he peeled it deftly with straight strokes from top to bottom, afterwards cutting it into convenient pieces for eating. But when it comes to a mango, it is hard to be dainty. Properly, one does not "eat" a mango -- one is said to "suck" (chupar) a mango; and it is extremely difficult to do this without getting the sweet, sticky juice all over your hands and face. Most Brazilians agree that there is only one proper place to deal with mangoes, and that is in a bath tub.